

## Essay by Aldous Huxley

BK - fascist salute:  
A salute used in Nazi  
Germany, in which the arm  
is rigidly extended forward,  
slightly above the  
horizontal.

Def-make a lingual toilet:  
clean itself with its tongue,  
as cats commonly do

Def-discreet: separate, distinct. (also spelled discrete)

**Stop and Answer:** Analyze and Argument—What contrast is Huxley drawing between humans and animals in this passage about the cats?

Similarly the word “love” bridges for us those **chasms** of momentary indifference and boredom which gape from time to time between even the most ardent lovers. Feeling and desire provide us with our motive power; words give continuity to

Def—vincible: capable of being overcome.

**Stop and Answer:** Deductive Reasoning - From the beginning of the essay, Huxley develops his general principle from a series of ideas about language. Summarize the reasoning that leads to Huxley's general principle.

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Now, language is, among other things, a device which men use for suppressing and distorting the truth. Finding the reality of war too unpleasant to contemplate, we create a verbal alternative to that reality, parallel with it, but in quality quite different from it. That which we contemplate thenceforward is not that to which we react emotionally and upon which we pass our moral judgments, is not war as it is in fact, but the fiction of war as it exists in our pleasantly falsifying **verbiage**. Our stupidity in using inappropriate language turns out, on analysis, to be the most refined cunning.

**Stop and Answer:** Deductive Reasoning - Huxley states his conclusion in the above paragraph. Explain how he uses deductive reasoning to reach this conclusion.

The most shocking fact about war is that its victims and its instruments are individual human beings, and that these individual human beings are condemned by the monstrous conventions of politics to murder or be murdered in quarrels not their own, to inflict upon the innocent and, innocent themselves of any crime against their enemies, to suffer cruelties of every kind.

The language of strategy and politics is designed, so far as it is possible, to conceal this fact, to make it appear as though wars were not fought by individuals drilled to murder one another in cold blood and without provocation, but either by impersonal and therefore wholly non-moral and impassible forces, or else by personified abstractions.

Here are a few examples of the first kind of falsification. In place of “cavalrymen” or “foot-soldiers” military writers like to speak of “sabres” and “rules.” Here is a sentence from a description of the Battle of Marengo: “According to Victor’s report, the French retreat was orderly; it is certain, at any rate,

BK - Battle of Marengo: A battle fought in 1800 in which French troops led by Napoleon Bonaparte defeated an Austrian army near the town of Marengo in northern Italy.

Def - Ironmongery:  
ironware.

**BK - Platonic Ideas:** In the teaching of Plato, the fourth century B.C. Greek philosopher, all things in the concrete world are actually mere copies of immaterial realities.

Def - Collectivities: groups of people.

love or hate it more intensely than we could do if we thought of it as what it really is: a number of diverse individuals. In other cases personification is used for the purpose of concealing the fundamental absurdity and monstrosity of war. What is absurd and monstrous about war is that men who have no personal quarrel should be trained to murder one another in cold blood. By personifying opposing armies or countries, we are able to think of war as a conflict between individuals. The same result is obtained by writing of war as though it were carried on exclusively by the generals in command and not by the private soldiers in their armies. ("Rennenkampf had pressed back von Schubert.") The implication in both cases is that war is indistinguishable from a bout of fisticuffs in a bar room. Whereas in reality it is profoundly different. A scrap between two individuals is forgivable; mass murder, deliberately organized, is a monstrous **iniquity**. We still choose to use war as an instrument of policy; and to comprehend the full wickedness and absurdity of war would therefore be inconvenient. For, once we understood, we should have to make some effort to get rid of the abominable thing. Accordingly, when we talk about war, we use a language which conceals or embellishes its reality. Ignoring the facts, so far as we possibly can, we imply that battles are not fought by soldiers, but by things, principles, allegories, personified collectivities, or (at the most human) by opposing commanders, pitched against one another in single combat. *For the same reason, when we have to describe the processes and the results of war, we employ a rich variety of euphemisms. Even the most violently patriotic and militaristic are reluctant to call a spade by its own name. To conceal their intentions even from themselves, they make use of picturesque metaphors. We find them, for example, clamoring for war planes numerous and powerful enough to go and "destroy the hornets in their nests" — in other words, to go and throw **thermite**, high explosives and **vesicants** upon the inhabitants of neighboring countries before they have time to come and do the same to us. And how reassuring is the language of historians and strategists! They write admiringly of those military geniuses who know "when to strike at the enemy's line" (a single combatant deranges the geometrical constructions of a personification); when to "turn his flank"; when to "execute an enveloping movement." As though they were engineers discussing the strength of materials and the distribution of stresses, they talk of abstract entities called "man power" and "fire power." They sum up the long-drawn sufferings and atrocities of trench warfare in the phrase, "a war of **attrition**";*

Def - Fisticuffs: fighting with the fists; bare-knuckle boxing.

Def - Turn his flank: turn the right or left side of the enemy's attack force.

Def - Assimilated ... lens:  
likened to the process by  
which glass is ground into  
lenses.

Def - Baton charge: the beating back of a mob by police officers wielding wooden clubs.

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explicit assimilation of a war, waged by allied League-of-Nations powers against an aggressor, to police action against a criminal. The first is the use of violence and fraud without limit against innocent and guilty alike; the second is the use of strictly limited violence and a minimum of fraud exclusively against the guilty.)

BK - League-of-Nations power: Countries (including Britain) who joined the League of Nations organized after WW I with the stated purpose of promoting peace.

**Stop and Answer:** Reinforce Key Idea—Deception—  
According to Huxley, how does the use of the word force create a deception?

Reality is a succession of concrete and particular situations. When we think about such situations we should use the particular and concrete words which apply to them. If we use abstract words which apply equally well (and equally badly) to other, quite dissimilar situations, it is certain that we shall think incorrectly.

Complete reading and questions to this point:  
Day 1: by beginning of class on 8/20  
Day 2: by beginning of class on 8/21

Let us take the sentences quoted above and translate the abstract word “force” into language that will render (however inadequately) the concrete and particular realities of contemporary warfare.

“You cannot have international justice, unless you are prepared to impose it by force.” Translated, this becomes: “You cannot have international justice unless you are prepared, with a view to imposing a just settlement, to drop thermite, high explosives and vesicants upon the inhabitants of foreign cities and to have thermite, high explosives and vesicants dropped in return upon the inhabitants of your cities.” At the end of this proceeding, justice is to be imposed by the victorious party — that is, if there is a victorious party. It should be remarked that justice was to have been imposed by the victorious party at the end of the last war. But, unfortunately, after four years of fighting, the temper of the victors was such that they were quite incapable of

BK - The Allies ...  
Versailles: The peace treaty ending WW I, signed at the Palace of Versailles near Paris in 1919, imposing humiliating punishments on Germany, which led to the rise of German nationalism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s.

making a just settlement. The Allies are reaping in Nazi Germany what they sowed at Versailles. The victors of the next war will have undergone intensive bombardments with thermite, high explosives and vesicants. Will their temper be better than that of the Allies in 1918? Will they be in a fitter state to make a just settlement? The answer, quite obviously, is: No. It is psychologically all but impossible that justice should be secured

**Stop and Answer:** Analyze and Argument—Compare the quoted statement and Huxley’s translation (in the italicized section above). How does his translation serve as support for his claim?

The next two sentences may be taken together. “Peace-loving countries must unite to use force against aggressive dictatorships. Democratic institutions must be protected, if need be, by force.” Let us translate. “Peace-loving countries must unite to throw thermite, high explosives and vesicants on the inhabitants of countries ruled by aggressive dictators. They must do this, and of course abide the consequences, in order to preserve peace and democratic institutions.” Two questions immediately **propound** themselves. First, is it likely that peace can be secured by a process calculated to reduce the orderly life of our complicated societies to chaos? And, second, is it likely that democratic institutions will flourish in a state of chaos? Again, the answers are pretty clearly in the negative.

By using the abstract word “force,” instead of terms which at least attempt to describe the realities of war as it is today, the preachers of collective security through military collaboration disguise from themselves and from others, not only the contemporary facts, but also the probable consequences of their favorite policy. The attempt to secure justice, peace and



- **Stop and Answer:** Rhetorical devices—What effect does Huxley create through repetition of the phrase “thermite, high explosives and vesicants”?

The alternatives confronting us seem to be plain enough. Either we invent and conscientiously employ a new technique for making revolutions and settling international disputes; or else we cling to the old technique and, using “force” (that is to say, thermite, high explosives and vesicants), destroy ourselves. Those who, for whatever motive, disguise the nature of the second alternative under inappropriate language, render the

world a grave disservice. They lead us into one of the temptations we find it hardest to resist — the temptation to run away from reality, to pretend that facts are not what they are. Like Shelley (but without Shelley's acute awareness of what he was doing) we are perpetually weaving

*A shroud of talk to hide us from the sun*  
*Of this familiar life.*

We protect our minds by an elaborate system of abstractions, ambiguities, metaphors and similes from the reality we do not wish to know too clearly; we lie to ourselves, in order that we may still have the excuse of ignorance, the alibi of stupidity and incomprehension, possessing which we can continue with a good conscience to commit and tolerate the most monstrous crimes:

*The poor wretch who has learned his only prayers  
From curses, who knows scarcely words enough  
To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,  
Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute  
And technical in victories and defeats,  
And all our dainty terms for **fratricide**;  
Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues  
Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which  
We join no meaning and attach no form!  
As if the soldier died without a wound:  
As if the fibers of this godlike frame  
Were gored without a pang: as if the wretch  
Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds,  
Passed off to Heaven translated and not killed;  
As though he had no wife to pine for him,  
No God to judge him. \*\*\*\**

The language we use about war is inappropriate, and its inappropriateness is designed to conceal a reality so odious that we do not wish to know it. The language we use about politics is also inappropriate; but here our mistake has a different purpose. Our principal aim in this case is to arouse and, having aroused, to rationalize and justify such intrinsically agreeable sentiments as pride and hatred, self-esteem and contempt for others. To achieve this end we speak about the facts of politics in words which more or less completely misrepresent them. The concrete realities of politics are individual human beings, living together in national groups. Politicians — and to some extent we are all

BK - Shelley ... familiar life: The romantic poet Percy Shelley wrote these lines in his 1820 poem "Letter to Maria Gisborne."

\*\*\*\* These lines are from "Fear in Solitude," a poem that romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote during what he called "the alarm of an invasion" of Britain by French forces near the start of the Napoleonic wars.

politicians — substitute abstractions for these concrete realities, and having done this, proceed to invest each abstraction with an appearance of concreteness by personifying it. For example, the concrete reality of which “Britain” is the abstraction consists of some forty-odd millions of diverse individuals living on an island off the west coast of Europe. The personification of this abstraction appears, in classical fancy-dress and holding a very large toasting fork, on the backside of our copper coinage; appears in verbal form, every time we talk about international politics. “Britain,” the abstraction from forty millions of Britons, is endowed with thoughts, sensibilities and emotions, even with a sex — for, in spite of John Bull, the country is always a female. Now, it is of course possible that “Britain” is more than a mere name — is an entity that possesses some kind of reality distinct from that of the individuals constituting the group to which the name is applied. But this entity, if it exists, is certainly not a young lady with a toasting fork; nor is it possible to believe (though some eminent philosophers have preached the doctrine) that it should possess anything in the nature of a personal will. One must agree with T. H. Green that “there can be nothing in a nation, however exalted its mission, or in a society however perfectly organized, which is not in the persons composing the nation or the society. . . . We cannot suppose a national spirit and will to exist except as the spirit and will of individuals.” But the moment we start resolutely thinking about our world in terms of individual persons we find ourselves at the same time thinking in terms of universality. “The great rational religions,” writes Professor Whitehead, “are the outcome of the emergence of a religious consciousness that is universal, as distinguished from tribal, or even social. Because it is universal, it introduces the note of solitariness.” (And he might have added that, because it is solitary, it introduces the note of universality.) “The reason of this connection between universality and solitude is that universality is a disconnection from immediate surroundings.” And conversely the disconnection from immediate surroundings, particularly such social surrounding as the tribe or nation, the insistence on the person as the fundamental reality, leads to the conception of an all-embracing unity. A nation, then, may be more than a mere abstraction, may possess some kind of real existence apart from its constituent members. But there is no reason to suppose that it is a person; indeed, there is every reason to suppose that it isn’t. Those who speak as though it were a person (and some go further than this and speak as though it were a personal god) do so, because it is to their interest as egotists to make precisely this mistake. In the

case of the ruling class these interests are in part material. The personification of the nation as a sacred being, different from and superior to its constituent members, is merely (I quote the words of a great French jurist, Léon Duguit) “a way of imposing authority by making people believe it is an authority de jure and not merely de facto.” By habitually talking of the nation as though it were a person with thoughts, feelings and a will of its own, the rulers of a country legitimate their own powers. Personification leads easily to deification; and where the nation is deified, its government ceases to be a mere convenience, like drains or a telephone system, and, partaking in the sacredness of the entity it represents, claims to give orders by divine right and demands the unquestioning obedience due to a god. Rulers seldom find it hard to recognize their friends. Hegel, the man who elaborated an inappropriate figure of speech into a complete philosophy of politics, was a favorite of the Prussian government. “Es ist,” he had written, “es ist der Gang Gottes in der Welt, das der Staat ist.” The decoration bestowed on him by Frederick William III was richly deserved. Unlike their rulers, the ruled have no material interest in using inappropriate language about states and nations. For them, the reward of being mistaken is psychological. The personified and deified nation becomes, in the minds of the individuals composing it, a kind of enlargement of themselves. The superhuman qualities which belong to the young lady with the toasting fork, the young lady with plaits and a brass soutien-gorge, the young lady in a Phrygian bonnet, are claimed by individual Englishmen, Germans and Frenchmen as being, at least in part, their own. Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori. But there would be no need to die, no need of war, if it had not been even sweeter to boast and swagger for one’s country, to hate, despise, swindle and bully for it. Loyalty to the personified nation, or to the personified class or party, justifies the loyal in indulging all those passions which good manners and the moral code do not allow them to display in their relations with their neighbors. The personified entity is a being, not only great and noble, but also insanely proud, vain and touchy; fiercely **rapacious**; a braggart; bound by no considerations of right and wrong. (Hegel condemned as hopelessly shallow all those who dared to apply ethical standards to the activities of nations. To condone and applaud every iniquity committed in the name of the State was to him a sign of philosophical **profundity**.) Identifying themselves with this god, individuals find relief from the constraints of ordinary social decency, feel themselves justified in giving rein, within duly prescribed limits, to their criminal

The evil passions are further justified by another linguistic error — the error of speaking about certain categories of persons as though they were mere embodied abstractions. Foreigners and those who disagree with us are not thought of as men and women like ourselves and our fellow-countrymen; they are thought of as representatives and, so to say, symbols of a class. In so far as they have any personality at all, it is the personality we mistakenly attribute to their class — a personality that is, by definition, intrinsically evil. We know that the harming or killing of men and women is wrong, and we are reluctant consciously to do what we know to be wrong. But when particular men and women are thought of merely as representatives of a class, which has previously been defined as evil and personified in the shape of a devil, then the reluctance to hurt or murder disappears. Brown, Jones and Robinson are no longer thought of as Brown, Jones and Robinson, but as heretics, gentiles, Yids, niggers, barbarians, Huns, communists, capitalists, fascists, liberals — whichever the case may be. When they have been called such names and assimilated to the accursed class to which the names apply, Brown, Jones and Robinson cease to be conceived as what they really are — human persons — and become for the users of this fatally inappropriate language mere vermin or, worse, demons whom it is right and proper to destroy as thoroughly and as painfully as possible. Wherever persons are present, questions of morality arise. Rulers of nations and leaders of parties find morality embarrassing. That is why they take such pains to depersonalize their opponents. All propaganda directed against an opposing group has but one aim: to substitute diabolical abstractions for concrete persons. The propagandist's purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human. By robbing them of their personality, he puts them outside the pale of moral obligation. Mere symbols can have no rights — particularly when that of which they are symbolical is, by definition, evil.

■ **Stop and Answer:** Deductive Reasoning—Huxley takes his general  
 ■ principle and applies it to politics. Summarize the deductive  
 ■ reasoning in this passage and describe what Huxley offers as  
 ■ support for his claim. (write your answer on the next page)



Politics can become moral only on one condition: that its problems shall be spoken of and thought about exclusively in terms of concrete reality; that is to say, of persons. To depersonify human beings and to personify abstractions are complementary errors which lead, by an **inexorable** logic, to war between nations and to idolatrous worship of the State, with consequent governmental oppression. All current political thought is a mixture, in varying proportions, between thought in terms of concrete realities and thought in terms of depersonified symbols and personified abstractions. In the democratic countries the problems of internal politics are thought about mainly in terms of concrete reality; those of external politics, mainly in terms of abstractions and symbols. In dictatorial countries the proportion of concrete to abstract and symbolic thought is lower than in democratic countries. Dictators talk little of persons, much of personified abstractions, such as the Nation, the State, the Party, and much of depersonified symbols, such as Yids, Bolshies, Capitalists. The stupidity of politicians who talk about a world of persons as though it were not a world of persons is due in the main to self-interest. In a fictitious world of symbols and personified abstractions, rulers find that they can rule more effectively, and the ruled, that they can gratify

Def - Bolshies: Communists. The word is shortened from Bolsheviks, members of the Russian Communist faction that came to power in the 1917 revolution.

instincts which the conventions of good manners and the imperatives of morality demand that they should repress. To think correctly is the condition of behaving well. It is also in itself a moral act; those who would think correctly must resist considerable temptations.

(From The Olive Tree)

Source: <http://danliterature.wordpress.com/aldous-huxley-collected-essays/aldous-huxley-essays-words-and-behavior/>

Source: *British Literature*. McDougal Littell Literature 2009.

- Stop and Answer the following questions:

- According to Huxley, what is the main reason why people use language inappropriately when discussing war?

- What does Huxley find “absurd and monstrous” about war?

- According to Huxley, why do politicians often use inappropriate language?